

Hospital has plans to speed ambulance response

By TIM FLACH
Staff Writer

Lexington Medical Center plans to cut in half in two years the average time it takes ambulances to reach Lexington County residents needing emergency care.

"That's going to be our goal" once the hospital takes over management of ambulances countywide next year, Mike Biediger, the hospital's chief executive officer, said Wednesday.

Medical experts call the ideal a response of eight to 12 minutes in suburban neighborhoods — the eastern half of the sprawling county — in 90 percent of calls.

It now takes county ambulances an average of 21 minutes to meet that stan-

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dard, consultant Jay Fitch said in a study for the hospital.

His analysis was part of the preparation that led hospital officials to agree tentatively to take over operation of the ambulances from county officials, possibly as soon as next spring.

The hospital isn't an expert in overseeing ambulances, Biediger said. "We're going to have to learn it, but it's certainly closely related to what we do."

Fitch's study supports the transfer of ambulances to the hospital, saying such arrangements improve medical care and save money.

Many aspects of the transfer remain to be settled.

Biediger would like to have 15 am-

bulances on the roads. The county has 10 and has ordered two more.

Fitch's study estimates that County Council will have to contribute \$200,000 annually as a subsidy, but Biediger thinks it will be more than that.

The talks on the transfer will settle questions like the extra equipment the county will add and the amount of aid it will contribute each year.

One of the things Biediger wants is computerized medical instructions so county 911 dispatchers can tell callers how to assist the injured until ambulances arrived.

The lack of such expertise is a problem, Fitch's study said.

Lynn Vaught of West Columbia, one of the hospital's 21 board members, wants to

make sure the transfer is beneficial instead of putting a problem agency under a different boss.

"I think it's doable but it's going to take an extreme amount of planning and resources to bring it up to national standards," he said.

Vaught also wants assurance that the cost of running ambulances doesn't contribute to raising the cost of other types of care.

County ambulances handle about 16,000 calls a year.

Fitch's study calls the 700-square-mile county "a difficult area to serve" because of its size, widely separated concentrations of neighborhoods mixed with lightly populated rural areas and Lake Murray splitting

the county.

The ambulance service also has problems with overworked crews and many neighborhoods without clearly posted addresses on homes, it added.

County councilman Billy Derrick of Batesburg-Leesville thinks the transfer envisioned will mean better response in the largely rural western edge of the county.

He's reserving final judgment until more about the switch is known, but likes the idea. "Conceptually, I think they can provide better service," he said. "That's what we're betting on."

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Ambulance transfer, tax put on hold

■ Lexington County Council had planned to move service to medical center by this spring

By APRIL SIMUN
Staff Writer

Lexington County's plan to turn over its ambulance service to Lexington Medical Center seems to have fallen by the wayside, county leaders said.

So has a proposal to ask voters for a 1-cent sales tax increase to pay for a new courthouse.

The at-least-temporary failure of both plans, plus the county's need for \$23 million to build a new courthouse, means this year's county budget process likely will be difficult.

"It's going to be a tight budget year," said County Council Chairman Johnny Jeffcoat of Irmo.

County and hospital leaders announced last summer that the county would transfer its ambulance service to Lexington Medical Center this

spring. Leaders touted the plan as a way to speed up the county's lagging response times, which have grown too long with the county's population growth.

"It (the deal) seems to be falling apart, but I don't know that yet," Jeffcoat said Monday, adding that the deal's outcome is not "carved in stone."

He said the county isn't pushing the plan now, while the hospital works on several other projects.

If the deal falls through, the county will have to shoulder the costs for

more ambulances and personnel.

Jeffcoat said the transfer might be delayed rather than killed altogether.

"We're not pushing them (hospital officials) to take the EMS service at this time," he said. "The timing may be better after some of their projects are completed."

The hospital has several construction projects under way, including a new patient care center in the town of Lexington and medical office complexes at the hospital and in Irmo.



Johnny Jeffcoat, Lexington County Council chairman, says the deal to move the ambulance service apparently has faltered.